

Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy

June 2017

How Women Journalists Are Silenced in a Man's World: The Double-Edged Sword of Reporting from Muslim Countries

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on Media, Politics and Public Policy

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Introduction

From 2009 until 2014, I was a journalist working for media outlets with foreign audiences, first for the Islamic Republic's state-run English media service, *Press TV*, and from 2011 for *Bloomberg News* and *The National*, a major regional newspaper based in Abu Dhabi. I was a member of a tiny group covering news from Iran in English.

During my time reporting there were moments when I realized that because of my job, my identity as a member of society—and indeed my life—could be threatened because of my gender.

Being a female journalist has risks in patriarchal Islamic societies like Iran. The scale of the risk became clear to me on July 22, 2014, when security forces of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) raided my apartment in Tehran. My husband and I were detained in Evin prison in the northern part of the capital, less than two miles from our home.

The Islamic Republic of Iran at the time was holding about five dozen news writers behind bars.¹ Among them were ten female journalists, including myself, making Iran the world's leading jailer of female journalists that year.

I was detained for 72 nights, 69 of them in solitary confinement, before being released on bail.² My freedom was conditional. The most obvious limitation was that I was neither allowed to work as a journalist nor speak with colleagues in the media about the alleged case against us. I was deprived of free expression.³

Underlying this punishment, although it was never stated as such, was that my captors were aware of my power as a journalist. They knew the attention that would result if I spoke out about my husband's unjust and prolonged imprisonment.

Iran's judicial system never charged me or summoned me to trial. Instead they used me as a tool to put pressure on my husband, Jason Rezaian, the former *Washington Post* bureau chief in Tehran who spent 18 months in prison while Iran and world powers, including the U.S., were negotiating the historic nuclear deal.

I realized that, although women make up a small number of imprisoned and jailed journalists, we face distinct threats and challenges, many of which can be hidden from the world through pressure tactics such as the ones I was forced to endure. I also came to understand that such moves are a part of the larger goal of silencing women and defusing grassroots attempts at gender equality.

While the current Iranian administration of President Hassan Rouhani claims to be promoting gender equality and the freedom of expression, chilling trends persist.

On April 26, 2016, after at least six months of imprisonment and without the benefit of due process, Iran's Revolutionary Court sentenced five journalists to five or more years in prison on charges of "acting against national security." The only female journalist in the group received the highest sentence, ten years.⁴

Afarin Chitsaz, who wrote for the *Iran* newspaper under direct supervision of the Iranian presidency, later had her sentence reduced to two years in the appeals court, when the administration finally stepped in.⁵ As in many other cases, including my husband's, the Revolutionary Court failed to provide any evidence against her. She has been in prison for a year on completely bogus charges.

When the Rouhani administration finally came to her defense, her captors used those words of support as an opportunity to discredit her even further, claiming she was having "immoral relations" with five of Rouhani's cabinet ministers.⁶ Their so-called evidence was a doctored image of Iran's foreign minister standing next to a woman with the face of Chitsaz superimposed on that of the original, which was later shown to be the minister's wife. With multiple intelligence bodies working in parallel but not together, any support from one can be used by another to worsen the situation.⁷

Stories like Afarin's and mine add a new layer of understanding about the interplay between power, religion, gender and media in Iran, one of the world's only theocracies and one of its longest standing authoritarian regimes.

Now that my husband and I are free and living in the United States, I have a responsibility to women—and in particular to my fellow journalists in Iran and other countries who may not have a platform, or the security—to make my voice heard.

Stay Cool, Ignore, Be Persistent

Misogyny and patriarchy are a fact that women working in Muslim countries learn to live with from an early age, but there were times when, I am not proud to say, I was able to use my gender to my advantage as a reporter. It is the double-edged sword of doing this work in countries where women are undervalued and perceived as weaker than men.

I know that on multiple occasions I was able to conduct interviews with conservative officials—both male *and* female—because they assumed I was less of a threat or that I had a smaller audience reading my work.

I was given a chance to ask a question at former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's final nationally televised press conference, before his second term ended. According to one of the coordinators in his media team, I was given the opportunity to ask the president a question because to him I seemed like an innocent girl incapable of asking a tough question. That is what the aide told me a

few minutes before the event began as I added my name to the long list of journalists eager to put a question to the president.

After the conference ended the same aide came to find me. “Miss Bloomberg,” he said, addressing me through the name of my employer, as many professional acquaintances did in Iran. “You asked an aggressive question and pressed the president with follow-ups. That was not our deal!”

I wondered what he had expected. Did he think that by saying I was “innocent” he would convince me not to do my job? Did he see me as a young, inexperienced reporter? Or was he just being flirtatious?

No matter what he intended to do, I just knew I had to stay calm, ignore him as long as his behavior wasn’t harmful, and persist in doing my job.

On one edge of the sword it is common for female journalists to be perceived as little more than nonthreatening and benign presences. On the other is a cloud of undesired, uncomfortable sexual energy that envelops and dominates what should be a routine professional encounter.

A growing number of female foreign correspondents who cover Islamic countries are making important contributions to uncovering and understanding this problem, as they are more easily able to contextualize these experiences, having been raised in Western societies where misogyny, sexual harassment and gender divisions generally are less acceptable.

I spoke to several of them for this project.

“I think that it’s true in general that women have to put up with more,” says Gina Chon,⁸ a former war correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*, who is now a Washington-based columnist for Reuters’ Breakingviews. She was speaking of unwanted advances from sources, including Middle Eastern officials.

Chon says that such advances are common, “especially as a reporter because you’re trying to get them to talk to you, so you feel you have to put up with that.” Often, she says she “just sort of had to laugh it off because I needed to talk to them. It’s just one of those things you unfortunately have to put up with sometimes.”

Chon acknowledges, however, that for local reporters the threats can be more real: “I had female Iraqi journalist friends, and for them it was much harder. It was harder for them to get people to take them seriously and to deal with people trying to hit on them or being flirtatious with them. Because I was a Westerner, but not obviously American, I think I was probably treated better.”

Chon adds that Iraqi female reporters “had to have a lot of courage, dealing with questions about why they weren’t at home and where their husbands were.”

“It was the sort of question that when they asked me that, we could joke about it,” she continues. “Whereas for them it was a serious question about their morals or ethics. They were the ones who had to face the most challenges. But the ones I knew were awesome at what they did. We had to be pretty persistent and they had to be even more so.”

There are many of us who remain committed to telling stories from our countries of origin no matter the risks we face and that persistence can come at a heavy price. While most foreign journalists do not have to worry about consistent and lingering threats from lecherous locals, that’s not the case for many domestic journalists. Said the Committee to Protect Journalists’ Courtney Radsch, “It is probably a pretty safe bet to say that women journalists who are working locally are more susceptible to pressure. And it isn’t pressure that is likely to come from the attacks or gendered threats, but that can also result in their families pressuring them into not doing journalism.”⁹

Online Harassment: “Click-Terrorism” Run by the State

Accusations of sexual misconduct, designed to humiliate, are often a tool of repression used in Muslim societies to silence critical journalists. They are not limited to women, but such allegations can be dangerous and socially detrimental for a woman living in a conservative Muslim society.

On July 22, 2014, an odd email landed in my inbox while I was working on a story about International Quds Day, a celebration in support of Palestinians that takes place on the last Friday of the holy fasting month of Ramadan. The sender’s address was unfamiliar and in the subject line they demanded 100 million rials (\$3,000). At first glance I was scared. I knew right away that something was wrong and yet I tried to calm myself down, to believe this was just a joke from a friend. I couldn’t stop myself from opening it. Inevitably, it was a huge mistake. The email said I had 10 hours to pay hush money or the sender would reveal the truth about a sexual scandal I was involved in. They claimed to have pictures and a tape as evidence.

The email was threatening, demanding that I not share the message with anybody. There were no bank account details mentioned, but if I didn’t transfer the funds immediately, the sender said they would forward photographs to my husband to show him who I really was and publish them on social networks such as Facebook.

I was sure there was no scandal. I had never done anything like that in my life. I had been with the love of my life for over five years and married to him for a year of that.

But the email was not designed only to threaten me and my marriage. Within five minutes of opening the message I received notifications on both Gmail and Facebook warning me there was suspicious activity on my accounts. Almost immediately after that I was barred from logging into the accounts. We would later

discover I had been hacked by an account from a Russian server and my password was being repeatedly changed.

Months later when I was in prison an interrogator mentioned the email. He had no shame revealing it was sent to me by the IT department of the IRGC.

Another such case is that of Khadija Ismayilova, who hosted a daily radio show called *After Work* on the Azeri service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. She had been reporting on corruption by Azeri officials, including the family of President Ilham Aliyev.¹⁰

Like Iran and other authoritarian regimes around the world, Azerbaijan's ruling elites seek secrecy so that they will not be held accountable for their private acts.¹¹ After Ismayilova revealed details of corruption in her reports, she was the victim of a compromising online sex tape and a letter threatening to release additional lewd material. She claimed that the letter said, "Whore, behave. Or you will be defamed."¹² She went public with the threat and was subsequently arrested and sentenced to a lengthy prison term.¹³ Although she was released after being imprisoned for more than a year, she is prohibited from leaving Azerbaijan.

According to Ismayilova, the episode is still her "main challenge" because even years after the blackmailing episode "whoever wants to shut me up brings that topic forward." The impact is amplified because of her gender. "Basically, for men it would be much easier to overcome that situation," she said.¹⁴

Like the other journalists interviewed for this paper, Ismayilova says her gender has also aided in her reporting. In her opinion, this is because people often underestimate women's intellect.

"Because we are women our interviewees consider us dummies and explain in more detail. So, this makes our interviews more complete. It's easier for women to get a full soundbite," she said.

Old-Fashioned Harassment

Male interviewees often treat female journalists in ways that can be hard to bear.

Some conservative male interviewees treat a female journalist with more modesty, refusing to make eye contact or keeping the conversation professionally formal. Some people may refuse to take part in an interview with a female reporter as they have the extreme view that it is impermissible to meet with a woman who is not a member of their family.

But there are others who treat you as a seductress, interacting with you as if your only use as a woman is for sexual gratification. They never say it out loud but their wandering eyes do all the talking.

I was once invited to travel with the current Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani to cover one of his monthly provincial trips as the only journalist writing for a foreign media outlet. I felt very privileged and excited about the opportunity and accepted it right away.

When the invitation arrived, I didn't doubt its sincerity. In my mind, the most important thing was the opportunity, which was, I admit, good for my career because foreign journalists were almost never included in these provincial trips.

So, I traveled with the presidential press corps to the biggest Iranian province, Sistan and Baluchistan, located in the southeast, bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan. Soon after the two-day trip was over and I published my stories, I was contacted by a female photojournalist who had helped me join the trip. She had a message from a presidential staffer, who asked how I planned to return the favor.

It wasn't clear to me immediately but it became obvious that I was being propositioned, which I strongly rejected. I was never extended an invitation from the president's office after that—not even to routine press conferences, limiting my access to official sources.

In retrospect, I wonder what would have happened if I had accepted his offer. For a female journalist in that situation there is no winning answer.

Female journalists face certain threats such as sexual intimidation, sexual assault or sexual harassment much more frequently than their male colleagues, which makes the need for gender-specific security training necessary and critical, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists and other organizations.¹⁵ There are not enough resources and training programs even for staff members of major international media organizations to prepare women for confronting violence and other threats. For freelancers, there are almost none.

A Hidden World inside Men's Territory: Untold Stories, Unheard Voices

Ironically, working with female officials in Iran is sometimes the greatest disappointment of all.

On the evening of June 14, 2013, when Iranians were still at the ballot box voting for their next president, current vice president, Masoumeh Ebtekar,¹⁶ was in Tehran's Hosseinieh Ershad mosque, which has served as a hub for political speeches and other Islamic events since the revolution.

With hours to go before the results would be announced, she declared to me that Rouhani would win the vote. Her confidence was what interested me. Realizing that I was a reporter for *Bloomberg News*, Ebtekar initially demanded I keep our

conversation off the record. But within a few minutes she changed tack. “Because we are both women we understand each other better,” she said. She could “trust the way in which I would write the story,” so we could chat on the record. The point was clear: although she is without a doubt the most powerful woman in the history of the Islamic Republic, she was acknowledging that we could both be relied on to self-censor simply because we are women. In retrospect, the sad truth is that she is right.

By the end of our conversation she was comfortable explaining the reformist party’s efforts to support Rouhani. He may have been a new name for the public, but he had been winning favor within the party since the last election. I had a story.

But why is a female official more comfortable being interviewed by someone of the same gender? Is it a feeling of mutual understanding or is it doubt in her interviewer’s ability? If a woman is in a top position but still doesn’t take you seriously as woman reporter, on some level she doesn’t take herself seriously.

Wendy Sherman, who served as the lead U.S. negotiator during talks with Iran over its nuclear energy program, made a keen observation in a conversation I had with her.¹⁷ She noted that most of the domestic Iranian journalists who accompanied the Iranian nuclear negotiating team were female and that she found it easier to connect with them.

Sherman’s comments reminded me that my gender has given me a form of special access. I was able to connect easily with ordinary Iranian women and often even female officials because of our shared experiences and perspectives on the world. How could a man cover the difficulties of Islamic dress codes, or female youth unemployment? Not to mention weddings and cesarean-section births, topics many men are uncomfortable talking about.

In one particular instance, I was working on an international project about alleviating youth unemployment and chose three sets of interviewees: a modern man, a Westernized woman and a more religious couple with a newborn baby. I realized I couldn’t do this if I was a male reporter. In order to report about their daily lives I had to spend hours and hours with each of them. I faced no problem with the young woman and man because they were both raised in non-traditional, Westernized families. But the young religious couple was nervous when speaking with me.

As a woman I could build a connection with the young mother who was emotionally open and told me how financial difficulties impacted their daughter. She was a few years younger than me so we could relate to one another easily, share our dreams and talk about our husbands. She didn’t have to abide by her Islamic dress code when we were alone together as that is only required in the presence of unrelated males. And through my rapport with her I won the trust of her husband as well.

While many of these subjects might be deemed only relevant to female readers, the reality is that without understanding them we ignore the story and perspective of half of any society. In fact, international coverage of Islamic countries long suffered from that very phenomenon as male correspondents dominated the profession until recently.

I found these themes repeated often in my conversations with other female journalists covering Islamic countries. The threats we face are real and often times in moments of crisis we are seen as an easy target for authorities—softer and more easily silenced—but we can also be nimbler in covering overlooked subjects.

In the emerging Middle East, where strongmen have been toppled and the voices of normal citizens are being considered for the first time in modern history, our platforms pose a unique threat to those in power. Or at least that's what they think.

In Egypt, for example, countless tales of sexual harassment and assault among the pool of female foreign correspondents have been logged in recent years. Often times these abuses are perpetrated in moments of chaos by protesters unaffiliated with the power structure, adding another layer to the complicated battleground of Middle Eastern news coverage.

“When they're covering protests in Egypt, men don't have to worry about sexual assault, whereas women do. That's the serious problem in Egypt,” says Abigail Hauslohner, a former foreign correspondent for *The Washington Post* and the paper's former Cairo bureau chief.¹⁸

Hauslohner believes the problems faced by female reporters are not unique to the Middle East, but rather indicative of the world we live in.

“You meet people everywhere—whether in America or in the Middle East—who are misogynists. You also meet people, most people, who don't seem to react differently to me being a woman—or if they do I don't notice it.”

While she had experiences of being devalued due to her gender by government officials in Egypt, Afghanistan and Iraq, she also says it happened often with the U.S. military. “I would embed with them in Iraq and Afghanistan,” she explains. “Not all the time, but you would sometimes get that sort of attitude from U.S. military commanders.”

Often times, though, being a female reporter in the Middle East has unforeseen advantages as well, especially in accessing stories from half of the population that are so rarely seen or heard from.

“In some situations people might be nicer to a woman than they would be to a man. In certain families who are particularly conservative, a male reporter wouldn't necessarily be able to interview all women in the home, depending on how conservative the home is. Whereas female reporters, we can always go into homes

and talk to women while also talking to men. So, that's an advantage, and I think male reporters don't always have terrific access to women in very conservative countries or in very conservative homes," says Hauslohner.

In some instances, the encounters are unexpected. The Associated Press's Vivian Salama spent a long afternoon with a group of male village leaders in Egypt engaged in a discussion of politics that ranged from the very interesting to mundane.¹⁹ At the end of the long visit she decided to pay her respects to the female acquaintances of the woman who had prepared a feast for the group, served by kids. They had been excluded from the conversation, as men and women, unless they are closely related, are not allowed to spend time in each other's company.

"On my way out I popped into the women's salon to thank the woman of the house and say goodbye," says Salama. "I was exhausted and anxious to return to my work but they wouldn't let me leave. Thank goodness! I had the most fabulous time—and an eye-opening time at that. The women talked about their sex lives, the most entertaining anecdotes about their marriages and how to keep their husbands satisfied; they gossiped, sang, told stories and more. It was so much fun—and so drastically different from the afternoon I'd spent with the men and much, much more memorable."

Conclusion

Journalists face great obstacles and threats to their own security when covering complex stories in the Middle East, including the Syrian war, the Shia-Sunni conflicts among the Gulf countries and Iran, the reversal of the Arab Spring in many countries, Israel-Palestine clashes in Gaza, the rise of the so-called Islamic State and the never-ending tensions in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Many may wonder why an increasing number of women in these Middle Eastern countries are entering journalism as a profession and why more Western female journalists feel empowered by covering these Islamic societies.

Indeed, as we have seen, not only does the state often try to pressure women into giving up this work, but there are subtler and less obvious factors working to deter them from journalism as a career path.

Yet, we can uncover stories with a lighter touch—sometimes major political ones—but also, and crucially, those moments like the one Salama described, providing a window into an often misunderstood and long deemed inconsequential sector of society.

It is this type of insight into the lives of women, and a fresh and emotional perspective on war, conflict and trauma, that has been so desperately lacking from Middle Eastern coverage for years. Sharing the perspective of 50 percent of the population that our male colleagues may not have access to is a major reason why many of us continue to put ourselves under tremendous risk.

More and more women reporters—both Western and local—are willing to tell their stories of prejudice and harassment, raising awareness. These stories will help international advocacy groups document instances of abuse, violence and silencing. And they will also help the younger generation of female journalists prepare themselves for the challenges they are likely to face in patriarchal, misogynistic societies.

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the input of female journalists who often place themselves at great risk. Some of their voices are heard here, but I want to pay tribute to the sisterhood of journalists who bring us news from far and near, who face increasing pressure on the job.

Sincere appreciation goes to my research assistant, Avantika Chilkoti, who has been invaluable in helping me to put the pieces of this narrative together.

I want to express my deep gratitude to the Shorenstein Center's faculty and staff for believing in my idea and providing me with the resources and guidance to complete this project.

Lastly and most importantly, I dedicate this to my mother who always supported me in my quest to become an educated and productive member of a society that does not place proper value on the contributions of women. She is my inspiration.

Endnotes

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¹³ Committee to Protect Journalists, *Attacks on the Press: Gender and Media Freedom Worldwide* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2016).

¹⁴ Khadija Ismayilova, interview by the author by phone, March 29, 2017

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ebtekar, who spent much of her childhood in Philadelphia, first gained prominence in Iran as the spokesperson and translator for radical Iranian students who raided the U.S. embassy, taking diplomats hostage in 1979.

¹⁷ Wendy Sherman, interview by author in person, October 2016.

¹⁸ Abigail Hauslohner, interview by author by phone, November 23, 2016.

¹⁹ Vivian Salama, interview by author by phone, November 18, 2016.